

The New Connection by TheRealSokka

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Summary:

How could Will not try everything he could to bring her back? She had done the same for him.

Even though he was only Will Byers, he had to try.

1. The Ghost

"Watch it, Zombie Boy!"

"Trick or Treat, Freak!"

It came completely out of nowhere. One second Will Byers was trick-or-treating, following after his understandably angry friend; the next Zombie Boy was frozen in the face of an evilly leering clown right in front of him. It was one shock too many.

"Buh!"

The boy recoiled and stumbled backwards, Bob's camera slipping from his grip. The bullies' laughter faded out as he hit the ground, like a badly tuned radio. When he sat up, they were gone. But so was everyone else: where just moments ago kids had strolled around the street trick-or-treating, he was suddenly completely alone. Will's heart nearly stopped when he recognized the darkness and the twisting vines. *No*. This couldn't be happening. "Mike?" he called out hesitantly. His friend had been with him just moments ago. They were all just a few steps ahead...

There was no reply. Just the black and blue darkness of the Upside Down and his own heartbeat, thundering far too loud in Will's chest. The panic was starting to creep in. "Mike!" he called again, louder.

Something heard him. From within the woods, he heard a chittering, almost like laughter. A second one answered from somewhere behind him, then another, and another. It sounded far away and yet dangerously close. Will spun on the spot, throwing panicked glances between the trees, but in the gloom he couldn't see anything. He put his hands over his ears in an attempt to shut out the growing noise. It brought back awful memories of the Demogorgon stalking him through the woods. It had made almost the same sound. But that thing had died, Will reminded himself frantically; they said it had died. Eleven had killed it. She had...

From one second to the next, the street fell utterly silent. Will froze where he stood, not daring to move. *Nothing* moved; no chitter, no

branches snapping, no footsteps creeping up behind him. The sudden silence was almost worse. Will's hairs stood on end. He would have bolted, if he had known what he was running from. The irrational part of his brain kept screaming *Demogorgon!* , and now, in the darkness, it didn't seem all that irrational anymore.

Don't panic. You've been here before. Will didn't know where that voice inside him got its confidence from,, because he wasn't feeling it. But it compelled him to move. He only knew was that he couldn't stay here. That was what Will Byers had learned during that week in September: He wasn't Eleven; all he could do in the face of the monster was run.

He turned around, some instinct telling him to get to the house, to safety - and saw someone standing there. It wasn't the monster. But it didn't make any more sense, either: it looked like someone from the other side, an actual person, here in the Upside Down. They were small, almost like a child, and they were staring right back at him: They saw him. In his surprise, Will almost stumbled. Then he found his voice again: "Hey!" he shouted. "I'm here!"

The other one seemed to hear him. They started to wave their arms in his direction, but if they said anything, Will couldn't understand it because a sudden low rumbling swept over the street and drowned out everything else. Tearing away from the inexplicably human figure, Will slowly turned around, eyes wide with fear. It was coming from the other end of the street, right opposite to where the person was standing, but after a few hundred feet, everything in that direction was submerged in shadow. Something was moving in there. Will took a slow step backwards.

And then the shadow rose into the sky. Like an enormous black cloud, it twisted and spread above the trees, until it towered over Hawkins.

Someone was shouting something at him. Will didn't comprehend it: the blood was pounding in his ears, he was frozen to the spot; paralyzed by fear. He could only watch as the shadow unfolded and spread into black tendrils, reaching out and churning like smoke. Then something like a head emerged. There were no eyes, but Will felt a gaze fall on him, ice-cold and piercing him to his core. There

was nothing remotely human in that feeling. And it was fixed solely on him. That's when pure panic took over and Will did the only thing he knew how to do: he ran, ran as fast as he could. He could *feel* the darkness right behind him; closer, ever closer. It wanted him.

There was the house, crawling with vines. The person was gone, like they had never been there at all. Perhaps they hadn't. It didn't matter. *Just run, just get away.* Will hid behind a wall and hugged his knees, praying that it would pass. He couldn't keep his body from shaking. Even with his eyes shut, he could feel it creeping closer; it reached out to him...

"Will!"

And suddenly Mike was there, shaking him by the shoulders. Shock was edged on his face: "Will! What's wrong? Are you hurt?!"

Will looked around in panic, uncomprehending, but the monster was gone. Instead, his friends were all around him; Dustin, Lucas and Max, all looking worried. "Is he okay?" Lucas was saying.

"I don't know." Mike said. He didn't let go of Will: "Hey. I'm going to get you home, okay? Come on, I'm going to get you home..."

Will was too shaken to reply. He could still feel the shadow on his skin. It was *right there*. He was aware that Dustin was saying something, but Mike seemed to brush him off and led Will away from the others. Will stumbled along with him. He didn't dare let go of his friend, too afraid of being pulled back into the Upside Down at the next moment.

Maybe today...

Over everything that happened, over the worry about his completely shaken friend, Mike had almost forgotten. But after almost a year, the steps towards the little blanket fort in his basement were practically a reflex, and he had taken them before he was even aware of what he was doing. Mike sat down under the door and took up his supercom.

It took him a while before he began to speak. He really needed something good to happen. Just once. That wasn't too much to ask, was it?

"It's day 353 today. I had a bad day. I don't know, I... I guess I wish you were here." He wished that more than he could possibly put into words, but he tried anyway. "I mean, we all do. If you're out there, just, please, give me a sign-"

"Mike."

He faltered and looked up from the walkie-talkie. He thought... "Eleven?" he whispered. There was no one to hear him, the room was empty - and yet it wasn't. Again he felt it; like she was almost close enough to touch, if he only reached out. She was *there*, only...

But of course she wasn't. She never was. This was pointless. Mike folded the antenna back in, holding back tears. *353 days*. He couldn't keep doing this. He wasn't Venkman; he couldn't really talk to ghosts, no matter how much he wanted to. "I'm really going crazy." he muttered.

"Hmm?"

From the couch, Will was blinking at him sleepily. Mike looked away, feeling stupid. He hadn't meant to wake him. "Told you." he said bitterly. "Talking to ghosts."

"It's your job." Will said, still half-asleep, tapping his *Ghostbusters* badge.

Mike couldn't laugh. "Yeah? Well, I'm not good at it."

Will blinked once, now fully awake. His look wandered from Mike to the supercom, and understanding dawned on his face. Sometimes Mike wished his friend couldn't always tell exactly what was going on with him. It made him feel absurdly guilty; like he was burdening him with his problems where Will had more than enough of his own. But no, Mike reconsidered when Will sat down beside him, his eyes so impossibly understanding; he had come to rely on that Byers-telepathy. He needed it.

"Eleven?" Will asked quietly.

Mike shrug-nodded: "Mhm. I – ah, I don't know why I'm doing it. It's like I still expect her to answer. So stupid."

Will lowered his eyes: "I'm sorry."

Mike jumped to his feet. He felt so angry all of a sudden. "Sorry? Sorry for what? That you came back from the Upside Down and El didn't?! You're here, like- like a friend should be, but she's just...gone, yet I still keep seeing her, and I *feel* like she's out there, but she's just not talking to me..." He had become quieter with every word, until the last was barely a whisper.

He more felt than saw Will close the gap between them. Mike was grateful for it; he really didn't want to be alone right now. But his friend didn't say anything, just stayed by his side in silence. What would you say to that, really?

Mike drew a deep breath: "I'm just- I'm just wondering, all the time, what I could have done differently, you know? She was protecting us, even at the end, but maybe if I could have done something, stopped the Demogorgon, somehow..." He noticed Will staring at him and shook his head: "I know it's stupid. The best we could do was hitting it with tiny stones. Stupid."

Will wasn't really seeing his friend. Hearing Mike's words, with the shock of the encounter gone, his mind had cleared and something had clicked into place. The person in the Upside Down...

"I saw someone." he said slowly. Mike raised his head, looking at him in surprise. "When I was in the Upside Down, I mean, before you snapped me out of it. I saw someone, and I- I think I heard them call my name. They knew me."

Mike's eyes grew wide. "Who? Who was it?"

"They were too far away." Will met his friend's look. He didn't want to give Mike false hope, but he had this nagging feeling. "It could

have been Eleven..."

"Could have been?! Did she say something, anything?"

"No. No, I'm sorry."

The hope that had flickered up on Mike's face seemed to falter and die before his eyes, and it was physically hurting Will to see. Mike looked like he wanted so desperately for his theory to be true, yet was telling himself it couldn't be. He swallowed: "No." He visibly needed to force himself to say it. "It can't be. There is no way she could have survived in there this long. No one could."

Will grabbed his arm: "But what if?" The more he thought about it, the more certain he felt. Who else could have gone there? She had tried to warn him... And for a moment, Mike had sounded so hopeful... Will's hands balled into fists. An idea formed in his mind. An idea that his every being rebelled against, but he forced himself to consider it. He had to summon his courage to speak the next words: "I can look for her when I - when I go back there."

"What? No!" Mike looked at his friend, aghast. "Did you forget what just happened?! You're not going there because I'm being stupid and I'm seeing things..."

"Oh shut up; it's going to happen anyway!" Will burst out. "I can't get out of this; it keeps happening, don't you understand? Do you think I just want to shiver and hide all the time? Maybe I can actually do something when it takes me, and not just - wait for this thing to get me!"

Mike drew back in surprise. He glanced at the door, as if expecting it to fly open any moment. After a few seconds, when no parent came rushing into the basement to demand what the clamour was about, he turned back to Will: "That's the first time I remember you shouting," he said quietly.

Will realized he was panting. He didn't know where it had come from, he just felt so - angry and helpless. He sat down on the couch. Against his will, the shadows of the Upside Down flashed behind his eyes and he blinked them away angrily. It just didn't leave him alone;

it was like a nightmare that he had to live through again and again. Only he had never seen someone else there before. Maybe this was the reason this was happening to him; maybe Eleven *was* there and maybe he could reach her.

Maybe *he* could finally help *her*, too. He never even got to say thanks.

"Do you...do you really think you could see her again?"

There was so much hope in Mike's voice, even though he was trying to keep it out. Will bit his lip. Even though his friend almost never talked about her, it was obvious how much Eleven meant to him. He had never believed that she was dead, like everyone else seemed to think. How could Will not try everything he could to bring her back? She had done the same for him.

Even though he was only Will Byers, he had to try.

2. Paladin, Cleric, Mage

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike and Will decide to investigate Will's strange vision further.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey guys! This story still lives!

I'm truly sorry for the long wait, but university has been draining lately. I've only recently managed to get back to writing, and that felt so good that I promptly dropped a huge chunk of words into this chapter. Perhaps that was a bit excessive; I honestly can't tell. Anyway; enjoy this part, and hopefully updates will be coming more frequently now.

A bit of feedback would be appreciated. Not gonna lie; it always cheers me up when somebody has something to say about my writing, even/especially if it's criticism.

When Will opened his eyes, the world was cold and dark.

Not dark in a starless night kind of way, but more unsettling; twisted. Will knew where he was: The winding street was overrun with vines, the buildings rotten and crumbling away. It was a familiar sight. Grey particles hung in the air everywhere, under a sky without a sun; and as soon as he noticed them they seemed to swarm around him eagerly, like hungry insects. "Welcome back!" they seemed to jeer.

Will shivered. Instinctively, he pulled his arms around his body, as if that could spend him some warmth here. It couldn't. The damp cold had already reached his bones, turning them slowly to ice.

Will tried to remember what it was like to feel warm, and found that he couldn't. He hated this feeling; hated it with every fiber of his body. He

could feel tears form in his eyes: It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. Why couldn't this place let him go? He'd gotten out; why did he have to come back here again and again?

Something creaked behind him. Footsteps. A high-pitched chittering.

Cold panic gripped his heart. Will knew better than to turn around. He knew exactly what he would see there. Instead he ran, ran away from the sound, as he always did.

If it got him, he was dead. He had to be faster. But his body wouldn't obey: his mind was tired after days without sleep, his lungs desperately aching for a breath of clean air that never came. His legs felt like lead, moving ever slower, and the chittering got closer and closer. Almost like it was mocking his efforts. His blood turned to ice. Will hurried to a door and threw himself inside.

There were people inside. For a moment, time seemed to freeze around Will. He knew them, and they knew him. His mother was the first to look up. She had been crying, cradling a sickly boy's head in her arms. Then she saw Him and she screamed.

Hopper was hunched over the small boy's body on the floor, trying to get him to breathe again. At Joyce's scream, he jumped to his feet. He stared directly at Will. There was a gun in his hand. In shock, Will realized he was going to shoot. He tried to raise his arms, tried to yell that it was just him and they had to run. The danger was behind him...

The hands he raised to protect himself were scaly and clawed, and they absorbed the bullets without effort. The sharp claws sprang out and crumpled the weapon, then darted for the cop's chest. Will could feel it all happening, but his bones were ice; he had no control. The woman cried out and cradled her son protectively in her arms. He stomped closer until He towered over them. Chittering, almost like laughter as the claws reached for the pair. In that moment, the boy's eyes flew open and he looked directly at Him. He screamed.

Will jolted awake, his own scream still in his ears.

For one panicked second, he didn't know where he was. It was still dark, like the other place. Will looked around wide-eyed in the

gloom. Had it finally gotten him again?

His pulse was racing, the blood pounding in his head, but when he managed to take a shaky breath, the air that filled his lungs was clean and warm. Stale even. How it always got in Mike's basement during a sleepover. Nothing like the noxious atmosphere of the Upside Down. Will turned around, to see Mike himself lying asleep next to him on the sofa, snoring lightly.

It was just a dream. Justadream, justadream, justadream...

Shaking, Will looked at his hands. There were no claws, just his small, pink fingers. His eyes saw that, but his stupid head still refused to accept it. He couldn't think clearly. In his vision, the basement was turning blurry, and for a moment he saw it turning rotten and decayed, vines creeping out of the corners.

Will fled to the Wheeler's bathroom. He locked the door behind him. And stared at the mirror. His own scared face stared back at him, looking close to a panic. His heart was racing dangerously fast. *Calm down. You're safe. You're not in the Upside Down. There's no danger here. You're not turning into a monster.*

He repeated this to himself like a mantra, until he almost believed it. "I am not a monster!" he said aloud, defiantly. But his voice sounded weak and unconvinced even to him. Hollow.

That place had never really let him go. He could feel a part of it still inside him, a part that kept pulling him back, awake or asleep. His chest constricted again; like the cold was still pressing his lungs together, smothering him bit by bit. It had never been this bad before. His head was filled with a strange buzzing sensation, swimming with thoughts that didn't feel entirely like his own. Perhaps, just perhaps, the persistent buzzing was an approaching headache. But to Will it felt more like he was going mad.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror. The doctors said he was physically fine. *Right.*

"Will?"

Mike's voice coming from beyond the door was faint, sleepy. But it was an anchor that Will could hold onto. *He's right there, see? No Upside Down. Stop panicking. Breathe in and out. In and out. You've done this before.*

Slowly, very slowly, his breathing normalized. He could hear his friend's footsteps in the next room and he focused on that. Breathe in, then out; slowly, like the doctor taught him.

There was a knock on the bathroom door. Mike's voice came from the other side, laced with worry: "Will? You in there?"

Will quickly splashed more water into his face, trying not to look like he'd just had a panic attack. Then he opened the door. Mike blinked at him, looking barely awake, his hair completely tousled from sleep and springing off in all possible directions. But by the worry that flashed on his face, Will must not have been entirely successful in his attempt to look alright. Small wonder; he felt like hadn't slept all night, and probably looked like it, too.

Mike opened his mouth as if to say something, then scratched his head: "Uhm. Are you okay?"

"Yeah." It wasn't *really* a lie. Right now he *was* okay, if okay meant not consumed by the Upside Down. The Demogorgon was dead; it couldn't hurt him or anyone else anymore. And he was still Will. He had left the Upside Down behind him. If only he could get his mind to accept that, too.

"Ah." For a moment, Mike looked like he wanted to say something more, but seemed to decide against it. He just met Will's eyes, his face softened and he nodded.

Will had to fight down the urge to hug his friend right then and there. Mike had never pressured him to talk when something was bothering him. Silently, Will promised himself that he would tell him – eventually. Then his friend gave a yawn and mumbled: "Move over. Or I might fall asleep again right here."

From experience, Will knew that that wasn't an empty threat. A grin stealing on his face, he stepped aside to let his friend in.

Will's smile faded as he watched his friend start to brush his teeth. Mike was in the nightmares, too. Just like Lukas and Dustin, just like his mother. But Will was never with his friends in those dreams. He was always the monster. He shivered, resting his hands on the sink.

It was better when Eleven was there. Or at least when he imagined her there, standing in front of his friends. Protecting them. *Eleven*. It was a vague but comforting feeling, like a voice whispering his name, telling him it was going to be alright.

When the distant figure in his vision had waved at him, he had felt the same.

"So." Mike said, glancing at him. "You still want to try it?"

Sometimes Will wondered whether his friend could read his thoughts. Just when he had gotten his resolve back.

"Yes." he replied, a tiny bit proud of himself that his voice didn't quiver. "I want to try it."

Deliberately entering the Upside Down again. And look for someone who may or may not even be there. He must really be a little crazy. But his best friend was the same kind of crazy, so perhaps that was alright.

Mike looked at him: "Thank you. I, uh, know this isn't easy. If I can, I want to help."

Will nodded, a lump in his throat.

"Okay then." Mike took a deep breath. In a heartbeat, he switched into scientist-mode. "So. How exactly did it happen last time?"

Will dutifully recounted everything he could remember from before the giant shadow had appeared. They'd been trick-or-treating in their costumes; Lucas and Dustin were vying for Max' attention; Mike was upset and Will was upset that Mike was upset. Had that really been only yesterday evening? It seemed to belong to a different world entirely. Shortly after, the three bullies had sprung him and then suddenly he'd been in the Upside Down, but as hard as he tried, he couldn't remember how exactly that had happened.

Mike chewed on his bottom lip, thinking hard. “Did a portal open or something?”

“No. No; it wasn’t like that. I think I fell and then I was just – there.”

“Hmm. So it’s like you’re just phasing through. But what triggers that?” Mike looked at him thoughtfully. “You think maybe it was the shock?”

Will shrugged: “Could be, I guess. I’m not sure there are clear rules for this, Mike.”

“There’s rules for everything, dammit!” Mike scrunched up his forehead: “Let me try something...”

About half an hour later, Mike had tried anything he could think of to give Will a hearty shock.

Admittedly, he was terrible at it. Will had only blinked at his latest attempt; a terribly colorful clown mask over from last Halloween which looked creepier than any zombie costume Mike had seen. It didn’t help. Will always used to be scared of clowns, but Mike guessed after a week in literal hell, it didn’t have quite the same effect anymore.

“Still nothing. You’re just not scary enough.”

Mike threw away the mask in exasperation. “This is stupid. If there is a way to send you to the Upside Down, this is not it.”

“No.” Will agreed.

“Not just the shock that triggered it, then.” Mike started pacing. “Perhaps you thought about it exactly at the time when it happened?”

Will gave a hollow laugh: “I’ve been thinking of little else, Mike.”

“Right. Sorry. I’m just trying to make sense of this. It has to follow

some rules.”

He was really getting frustrated with this. There had never been a situation he couldn't understand by logical thinking, but this stupid other dimension seemed to follow its own logic. And in a few hours they would have to be in school again. Mike was honestly not sure if he could deal with that now. School had seemed pointless for a while, and now, when he finally had something; a lead; a little hope after 353 days of unanswered calls, he didn't think he could stomach an entire day of not doing anything about it.

“Maybe-“, Will began hesitantly, “we could look at Castle Byers. That's where she found me, perhaps – I don't know, maybe that's a connection.”

Mike gave him a skeptic look: “You think so?”

Will didn't look certain, either. “I don't know. Perhaps, we've got this all wrong and we can't contact El at all; just the other way around. But we could try.”

As much as Mike didn't want to admit it, his friend could very well be right with that assumption. El was the psychic, after all. “Maybe.” he allowed reluctantly. “But only you have the visions...” Mike paused for a moment, having had a thought: “Will, do you feel – exhausted after these episodes?”

Will frowned at him. Mike flushed when he realized that that sounded like one of the questions the doctor at the lab would ask. His friend cleared his throat:

“Not really. Why?”

“Eleven. Everything she did cost her energy. Remember, we had to carry her out of AV after she connected to you in the Upside Down. I was just wondering if this could be something similar, like these visions were you creating a connection to her or something.”

Will scoffed: “I think I would know if I'd brought some supernatural powers back from that place, if that's what you're asking. I told you; I have no control over what is happening, and until yesterday I

certainly didn't want it."

"Of course not, sorry. It's just – you having psychic powers would be really helpful right about now."

Will managed a half-smile: "I've always wanted to be a wizard."

"Maybe El can teach you, when we find her. Surely you must have some potential, Will the Wise." Mike teased. He gave a yawn, despite himself. Then he noticed Will smiling at him. "What?"

"You didn't say *if* anymore. You said *when*, Mike."

When Karen Wheeler came down into the kitchen the next morning, she was surprised to find it practically empty. Only her husband was there in his bed robe, reading the morning newspaper. Usually either Nancy or Mike would be already at the table toasting their bread, and she had come to know Will as even more of an early bird. She cleared her throat: "Hey, Ted. Have the boys not come up yet?"

Her husband not so much as glanced up: "Mm, hmm. Must be still sleeping."

"That would be a first." Nancy had visited that late party yesterday, so she likely needed some sleep, but the others had been home almost suspiciously punctual. She decided to check on them, lest they were late for school.

As she descended the cellar steps, a strange noise reached her ears. The two boys were lying on the sofa; not sleeping, but twisting and groaning. Mike was holding his stomach. He looked up when she came in: "Mom. I feel sick."

"Me too." Will groaned to his right.

"Oh dear, what's wrong?" Mrs. Wheeler asked, worried. Then her eyes fell on the table, brimming with empty candy bars, and she got the picture. She gave an exhausted sigh: "Dear me; Mike Wheeler, when will you grow up and learn to control your greed?! Wasn't the

disaster with the cotton candy lesson enough for you?"

Mike doubled over: "Ow! I'm sorry mum."

"Sorry, Mrs. Wheeler. It was such a fun Halloween; we lost track. Ouch!"

Karen looked at Will's pained face, and her expression softened. "Oh boys. Is it very bad? Do you feel able to go to school?"

Two pairs of pitiful puppy eyes looked up at her in response. Mrs. Wheeler swallowed the scolding she had intended. "I'm going to get you some hot water bottles, see if it helps." She grimaced when Will groaned again. "I'm sorry, my dear, but we have to go to work soon. Do you want me to call your mum?"

"No, she- she'll be busy. I don't want to worry her. But thank you, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Okay. Okay, try to get well. If you'll feel better, I'll leave you some breakfast." She shook her head as she climbed the steps: "I only hope you'll learn something from this. You're old enough to know better."

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The instant the door closed, Mike relaxed and turned over on his stomach: "Incredible. She must really have a soft spot for you. Usually I'd be on my way to school by now, stomach ache or no."

Will grinned: "Cotton candy disaster?"

"Shut up."

They waited until they heard the Wheeler's car leave the driveway before they threw away the blankets and bottles. Mike didn't like lying to his mom, but neither of them wanted to wait until after school to test their theory; they were still too high-strung from what happened yesterday. So, after a hasty breakfast, the two of them swung onto their bikes and rode off towards the woods.

To Mike, the feeling that they were doing something brought a certain elation, even though theirs wasn't so much a plan as a vague

idea. They hadn't bothered to change out of their costumes, and as they entered the shade of the trees, Will began to hum the *Ghostbusters* tune.

Mike spoke into his walkie-talkie, trying to get reinforcements: "Yes, Lucas, now. No, I don't... Look, just tell her whatever. It's really important. Over and Out." He turned to Will: "He says he'll be there fast as he can. But I can't reach Dustin; he's just not responding."

"Maybe he's overslept?" Will suggested.

Mike turned off the road into the forest: "First lesson today is science. He's never late for that." He briefly considered calling a Code Red, but then decided that was probably overkill. If it turned out that they'd just sit around and nothing happened, he'd look pretty stupid, really.

After a few minutes, they reached the little hut made of wooden logs that Jonathan and Will had named Castle Byers. Above it, the American flag was hanging low, with no wind to lift it. A few yards away, the Byers' house could just be made out through the bare tree branches. It was almost exactly as Mike remembered, and it made him unexpectedly nostalgic. Since last fall, Will had never asked to meet him here again, and Mike had to admit that he missed it.

He had half expected Eleven to just show up here, and when she didn't he felt a pang of disappointment, even though he knew that was stupid. "So, what now?" he asked.

"I don't know. I guess we wait a while and see if something happens." Will didn't sound sure anymore either. In fact, he suddenly looked downright nervous. He held up the sheet that covered the entrance for Mike to enter.

The interior was cozy more than anything else. Mike had always liked how it felt like a small, lived in room rather than an actual forest hut. You could immediately see who lived here: The walls were lined with colorful drawings and the matching pens and paper were all scattered over the floor and the little table Will used to draw on. The head of the household himself entered behind Mike and blushed: "Oh man. Gimme a moment to tidy this up."

“You don’t have to.”

“Just left all this here...”

While Will was busy, Mike’s glance happened to fall on a half-finished picture laying on the table. It showed a group of people in colorful cloaks, each one brandishing either sword, staff or bow. The faces looked familiar. Mike took it up and inspected it closer. “Is that us?” he asked.

“Hmm? Yeah.” Will replied when he saw what Mike was looking at. “I must have lost our old one somewhere, and it was outdated anyway.”

“Outdated?” Mike asked when he noticed the empty space next to his paladin. Upon looking closer, he found the outline of another character. Any features were missing, but she had a shaved head and there were sparks flying from her fingers. The bard and the paladin had made space for the new character, and she looked a part of the team, like she’d always been there.

“You- you’ve added El.” he said.

Will looked up and blushed: “Oh, it’s just a rough sketch. I couldn’t draw her better without a picture or something. But, I mean, now that we have a mage in the party, I couldn’t leave her out.”

Mike stared at the figure, a million emotions rushing through his chest. He had to clear his throat. “Yeah. Um, Will?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“For what? His friend looked honestly surprised.

Mike averted his eyes: “I...just...thank you. Really.”

“O-Okay. Yeah, no problem.”

...

Will took the picture from Mike and looked at each party member, including the roughly drawn mage girl. He suddenly felt absurdly happy. This was almost like *before*, when their group used to just meet up here at the castle and play their games; without any real monsters to worry about. He missed that. And Mike – it had been a long time since Will had seen that look on his face. He would give anything to make it stay.

Then find Eleven. That's what matters.

Will would have liked to just talk for a few moments longer. But as long as that gap remained in their picture, they couldn't do that.

That gap- his eyes were drawn by it. For some reason, he felt like there was something missing.

The humming grew more insistent.

It had almost faded since he'd woken up from that nightmare, but once he'd entered Castle Byers, it suddenly was as if a beehive had made its home in his head. Will definitely couldn't chalk it up to a headache anymore. Strangely enough, it didn't scare him, exactly. It was the feeling of something familiar; like something he should recognize, but didn't.

Before he knew it, his hand had found a pen and he began scribbling at El's outline.

"Will?" Mike asked, perplexed. "What are you doing?"

Will heard every word, but couldn't divert his concentration to answer. Another few lines there... This was important, somehow.

"Hey!" Mike shook him by the shoulder. Perhaps he was afraid that Will was slipping off again. "Will?! Are you okay?"

Will blinked back to reality, startled: "I..."

Mike scooted closer to see what he had been drawing. Then he looked up and almost whispered: "El doesn't have long hair..."

The Byers boy stared at the curly mat of brown hair that had just

sprung from his pen and now covered the head of the previously featureless mage. He didn't know where it had come from. But it looked right, somehow. *But still missing something...* With a few more lines, he added a pair of open, curious eyes to the empty face.

Mike was watching in awe, not daring to interrupt. Slowly, El's figure became more pronounced; her face adopting a focused look; the lightning now shooting from hands curled into fists. When she was wearing the beginnings of a winter coat, Will stopped. There was something more, something else. He started rummaging in a box next to him, searching for a different color.

"Will?" Mike breathed. "Are you seeing something?"

The humming was now loud as a current. And still Will didn't worry about it. There was something oddly calming in the feeling it brought with it.

"It's like- I feel like there's something at the back of my head." Will muttered. He tried his best to explain: "Like, this important stuff you can never remember, no matter how hard you try." His eyes found what he was looking for. He leaned backwards to reach for the pen, a gold crayon: "Perhaps I can draw it, though."

Then, as his fingers closed around the crayon, he was suddenly touching something slimy.

Surprised, he pulled away to find a sticky substance on his fingertips. It smelled foul, like rotten eggs. He shook out his hand, but it wouldn't come off. Suddenly his stomach did a rough flip. He felt queasy. The stuff looked somehow familiar.

And then the entire room was covered in it: the castle was submerged in gloom; the pictures rotted away and the logs falling to pieces.

Mike was gone.

Will gasped audibly. "Mike?" he whispered. His voice echoed in the small space.

No answer. Will was alone. *Again.*

It was an effort to stay calm. "If you can hear me; it's working: I'm in the Upside Down." he said overly loudly, hoping that his friend heard him. He tried his best to slow down his breathing, repeating his mantra: Mike was in here with him, he could pull him out if something should happen. There was nothing to worry about. This was what they had hoped would happen, wasn't it? Will remembered that he couldn't waste any time: he had to look for Eleven. Resolved, he pulled away the rotting sheet and stepped outside.

The shadow was right there. Its enormous presence hovered over Castle Byers like a grotesque black spider, extending tendrils of smoke to all sides. And the instant Will appeared it knew he was there. Will's breath caught in his throat as he felt the malevolent gaze fall on him.

Before he could do anything, a gust of wind swept him from his feet and he fell back against the logs. The shadow monster churned, and Will felt something, almost like triumph. A mass of darkness descended from the thing's center and moved towards him. Will couldn't move; it was like he had been paralyzed. He tried to scream, but no sound escaped his mouth. Something wrapped around his legs and wandered upwards, hungrily reaching for his face...

And then it was gone. The next moment, the sun was shining again and Mike's hand was in Will's. His friend was shouting at him: "Will! It's me, wake up! You have to..." He stopped and breathed a sigh of relief when their eyes connected. "Hey; you're here. Are you...?"

Will spun around and stared at the empty air above the castle. Nothing. There was just the sun falling through the branches overhead, but the seeming absence of the threat just scared Will even more. It was like he could still hear the echo of the monster's angry roar lingering in the forest air. "Run!" he croaked.

Mike's eyes widened, but he didn't ask: he pulled Will to his feet and dragged him along to their bikes. Will set a frantic pace. He didn't dare look back. They didn't stop until they reached the road into Hawkins. There, Mike jumped off his bike: "What happened? Was it the shadow monster again?"

Will nodded weakly. The realization was hitting him in waves,

making him shake all over again: It had been so close the entire time; *the entire time*. Had Mike not woken him, it would have had him. He realized that thing could still be right with them, and he would never know until it pulled him back.

He had to pull himself together not to just keep running. Meeting Mike's worried look, he stammered: "It-It was there. It's stalking me, wherever I go. It was there, right there, right above us. It..it..." He started to shiver uncontrollably.

...

Mike hugged him. He didn't have any words; he just hugged Will and felt him sob against his shoulder. His friend felt cold, as if he still wasn't fully here. Mike cursed silently; most of all himself for agreeing to this. He couldn't imagine what Will went through when he blacked out, but he saw the outcome, and he felt monstrously selfish for letting him go through that alone. It was taking too heavy a toll. And there was nothing he could do other than just hold his friend.

Slowly, Will's sobs subsided. Mike heard a tiny, muffled: "Sorry."

He hugged him tighter. "I'm the one who should say sorry. I..."

The sound of a bell made them both jump. A lone bike was driving towards them. Mike relaxed when he recognized the driver and cursed, audibly this time: "Shit, Lucas! Where have you been?"

Lucas screeched to a halt, out of breath and wearing a completely exasperated look. "I came as fast as I could, okay?! My nosy sister isn't as easy to fool as your parents. What's up with all the rush?" Then he noticed Will, noticed the state he was in and went pale: "What's wrong?"

"A lot." Mike slowly let go: "Are you okay?"

Will took a shuddering breath: "Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay."

"Uh, you don't look even remotely okay! What happened to you?"

It didn't escape Mike that Will was still looking around wide-eyed.

This was not the place for such an explanation. “Let’s go back to my place.” he suggested, fighting back disappointment. For just a moment he had thought they were as step closer, but instead it looked like he’d almost lost Will; and he didn’t want to risk that ever again.

Lucas was at a loss: “Didn’t you say you wanted to meet up at Castle...?”

“No!” the two said unanimously.

Author's Note:

I'm starting too many different stories again. This one is really fun (and a little addicting) to write so far though, so I'll just see how far I can spin this.

Do please tell me what you think. I'll continue the other Stranger Things stories, but I guess this is the ambitious one? Kinda.